THE OFFERING
OF THE MAṆḌALA

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"The venerable [Buddha] said: 'Subhūti, what do you think? If a noble son or noble daughter completely filled this universe, a billion worlds, with the seven precious things and offered it as a gift, would that noble son or noble daughter generate on that basis a great heap of merits?' Subhūti replied, 'Venerable, it would be great.'"[1]

This passage is taken from the famous "Diamond Sutra," a canonical text of *mahāyāna* Buddhism. I have quoted it because it constitutes an example of the exoteric sources referred to by the esoteric *vajrayāna* practice known as the "*maṇḍala* offering."

The author probably lived in the second century CE, so the dialogue between the Buddha and disciple Subhūti, a recurring figure in *prajñā-pāramitā* literature,[2] is a fiction. The criterion of literary fiction could be formulated as follows: if the Buddha were to talk about this topic today, what would he say? Obviously, the assumption is that the topic be rooted in ancient tradition. Regarding the sources in the Pāli language, one stanza of the *Dhammapada*, a popular collection of verses attributed to the Buddha, goes like this::

"Whatever gift and oblation
a person seeking merits
may offer in the world for a whole year,
all this is not worth
a quarter of the merits acquired
by paying homage to those who are upright.
This is truly excellent."[3]

In *vajrayāna*, the *maṇḍala* offering is the ritual donation of a round tray containing symbolic or actual gifts. The offering is made

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[1] My translation is based on the Tibetan version: Si tu chos kyi 'byung gnas (ed.), "Phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa rdo rje gcod pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo," *bKa' 'gyur (sde dge par phud)*, vol. 34, Delhi karmapae chodhey gyalwae sungrab partun khang, 1976-1979, pp. 245-246 (BDRC). Cf. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom* (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), p. 34; Paul Harrison, "Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā: A New English Translation of the Sanskrit text Based on Two Manuscript from Greater Gandhāra," in Jensen Braarving (ed.), *Buddhist Manuscripts* (Vol. III, Oslo: Hermes Publishing, 2006), p. 145.

[2] Cf. Edward Conze, *op. cit*., p. 41; *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines & Its Verse Summary* (Bolinas: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973), p. xii.

[3] *Dhammapada*, 108.

to buddhas, great bodhisattvas, arhats, lineage masters, personal masters and also to the *dharma*, spiritual teaching. The purpose would be the accumulation of merits. But what does it mean to accumulate merits and why is it important?

The world in which beings experience suffering and happiness is called *saṁsāra*, as it is the place where rebirths occur due to karma, the actions they have performed. Suffering is caused by non-virtuous actions, negative karma or demerit, while happiness is caused by virtuous actions, positive karma or merit. Therefore, the Buddha taught that it is important not to accumulate demerits and instead it is important to accumulate merits.

The merits and demerits are comparable to nutritious plant seeds such as rice and invasive plant seeds such as weeds, respectively. The place where the seeds of merits grow is called the "field of merit." If the seeds of meritorious karma are not sown in a field of merit, they cannot grow. The fields of merit are the sentient beings transmigrating in *saṃsāra*, the buddhas free from *saṃsāra* and also the *dharma* taught by them. Sowing the seeds of meritorious karma in the fields of merit means performing positive actions with body, speech and mind for the benefit of other beings.

Generosity (*dāna*) is the most common way of accumulating merits. In particular, generosity toward righteous people who practice and teach *dharma* is supremely meritorious. Therefore, the upright, wise people who form the community (*saṅgha*) consisting of exemplary practitioners and teachers represent "a supreme field of merit for the world," that is, for those who make offerings.[4]

A supreme, incomparable field of merit is defined "as a place without equal in the world for growing merit; just as the place for growing the king's or minister's rice or corn is the king's rice-field or the king's corn-field, so the Community is the place for growing the whole world's merit. For the world's various kinds of merit leading to welfare and happiness grow with the Community as their support. Therefore the Community is 'an incomparable field of merit for the world.'"[5]

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[4] Piya Tan, "Aṭṭha Puggala Sutta," *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 8.59, SD 15.10a, p. 152.

[5] Buddhaghosa, Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (tr.), *The Path of Purification*: *Visuddhimagga* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2011), pp. 217-218.

In *mahāyāna* Buddhism, the incomparable field of merit is expanded to include all the arhats, great bodhisattvas and buddhas of the past, present and future; therefore, offerings to the field of merit must also be expanded to include the entire universe, a billion worlds.

The universe is the "buddha field," the place where an enlightened being operates. When the disciple Ānanda asked the Master how far he could extend his voice to be heard, the Buddha replied that it could reach the worlds of a "minor system," that is, a thousand worlds like this one: "a thousand times the world in which the sun and the moon turn and light up the quarters with their radiance."[6] Not only that, actually his voice could be heard everywhere, also in a "middle system," consisting of a thousand minor systems, and even in a "major system," which includes a thousand middle systems, a billion worlds.

The world in which we live is characterized by these seven basic aspects: the central mountain Sumeru (Meru), the Sun, the Moon and the four main islands, that is, the continents of the eastern (Pūrvavideha), southern (Jambūdvīpa), western (Aparagodānīya) and northern (Uttarakuru) quadrants.

In the Buddha's teaching, the existence of Sumeru (Pāli Sineru) is a certain fact, as is the presence of several groups of powerful non-human beings both on the same central mountain and in the spaces above it: the four great kings (*mahārāja*) guardians of the four quadrants, the gods (*deva*) of the world of desire, and the spiritual beings (*brahmā*) who live in the world of form and the world without form.

Later *abhidharma* literature specifies that the base of the lands and waters is comparable to a golden disk, in the centre of which Meru is wedged similarly to an inverted pyramid or cone. Along the entire perimeter of the plane is a circular barrier, a kind of impassable wall like an iron mountain range; according to Buddhaghosa (5th century), its height is slightly less than that of Mount Meru and it extends equally downward from the base.[7]

In *vajrayāna*, the practitioner who intends to pay homage to the masters, the great bodhisattvas and buddhas of the three times,

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[6] Piya Tan, "Abhibhū Sutta," *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3.88, SD 54.1, p. 13.

[7] Buddhaghosa, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-201.

should imagine offering them the *maṇḍala*, the circle of this world and, ideally, the circles of all the worlds of the major system, the whole universe full of precious things.

Although this world is the place of *saṁsāra*, it is by no means valueless. Both the environments and the beings who inhabit them are extraordinarily rich in wonderful potentialities and qualities, analogous to fertile soils and vital seeds or fruits. They are symbolized by "seven precious things": gold (*suvarṇa*), silver (*rūpya*), lapis lazuli (*vaiḍūrya*), rock crystal (*sphaṭika*), red pearl (*lohitamukti*), emerald (*aśmagarbha*) and white coral (*musāragalva*).[8]

The expression rendered as "seven precious things" also appears in the *sutta*/*sūtra*s, but in different contexts, to denote the riches of a universal sovereign:[9] the wheel (Pāli *cakka*, Skr. *cakra*), the elephant (P. *hatthi*, S. *gaja*/*hasti*), the horse (P. *assa*, S. *aśva*), the gem (P., S. *maṇi*), the woman (P. *itthī*, S. *strī*),[10] the householder (P. *gahapati*, S. *gṛhapati*) or the man (S. *puruṣa*),[11] the commander/adviser (P., S. *pariṇāyaka*)[12] or the sword (S. *khaḍga*).

The Buddha's accounts of some universal sovereigns who lived in remote ages focus on the special qualities of the seven riches.[13] Being gifts from heaven due to the extraordinary merits of the sovereign, they are by no means common.

The wheel is a kind of great luminous "flying disc." It appears in the sky initially during the ruler's consecration; later it precedes him, still in the sky, leading him and his army to the peaceful conquest of the whole world. All the kings who see the wheel arriving in the sky willingly accept the rule of the new sovereign.

The elephant and the horse are amazing intelligent means of transportation that enable the universal sovereign to fly and travel immense distances in a very short time.

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[8] See Douglas Osto, *Power, Wealth and Women in Indian Mahayana Buddhism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), pp. 73, 119.

[9] Pāli *cakkavatti*, Skr. *cakravartin*.

[10] Tib. *btsun mo*, "queen."

[11] Tib. *blon po*, "minister."

[12] Tib. *dmag dpon*, "general."

[13] Cf. Piya Tan, "Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta," *Majjhima Nikāya* 129, SD 2.22, pp. 270-274; "Mahā Sudassana Sutta," *Dīgha Nikāya* 17, SD 36.12, pp. 104-109; "Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta," *Dīgha Nikāya* 26, SD 36.10, pp. 29-30.

The gem is an intense and inexhaustible source of light. The woman "surpasses human beauty, though she does not reach the beauty of the gods."[14]

The householder is a kind of finance minister capable of finding needed riches everywhere. The commander or adviser always knows how to advise the right action to take under all circumstances.

The seven riches of a universal sovereign are the result of his merits accumulated in previous lives, whereas the seven precious things that should be offered according to the "Diamond Sutra" are the cause of the accumulation of merits.

Even a buddha possesses seven riches, the seven factors of enlightenment (*sapta-bodhyaṅga*);[15] However, if a universal sovereign wanted to obtain them, he would have to abandon the things of the world.[16] The temporal path of a universal sovereign and the spiritual path of a buddha are different: to remain in the world, or to renounce the world.

Certainly it is desirable for *dharma* to inspire and influence the government of nations, but a monk or nun should not be involved in politics in any way; therefore, the riches of the universal sovereign cannot be the goals of a religious person following the path of enlightenment.

Yet, in Tibet the better known ritual of *maṇḍala* offering, created by the monk Chögyal Phakpa (1235-1280), head of the *Sakya* school, includes precisely the seven riches of the universal sovereign.[17]

The *maṇḍala* offering formulated by Chögyal Phakpa reflects his social role as the religious preceptor and political representative of

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[14] Piya Tan, "Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta," *Majjhima Nikāya* 129, SD 2.22, p. 273.

[15] Mental presence, investigation of phenomena, vigour, happiness, stillness, meditative absorption, equanimity. See Piya Tan, "Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta," *Dīgha Nikāya* 26,SD 36.10, pp. 10-11.

[16] Cf. Ibid., pp. 11-12. Cf. Piya Tan, "Lakkhaṇa Sutta," *Dīgha Nikāya* 30, SD 36.9, p. 181.

[17] See Chögyal Pakpa Lodrö Gyaltsen, *The Thirty-Seven Point Maṇḍala Offering* (Lotsawa House). Cf. *Sa skya pa'i chos spyod khyer bde kun tshang*, Mang+ga D+hA Dza, 2000, pp. 23-25 (BDRC).

the Mongol leader Kublai Khan, founder of the Yuan Dynasty, which ruled China from 1271 to 1368.[18]

According to the 14th Dalai Lama, "he was the first king who unified the throne by bringing together the religious sects and political institution."[19] So, it is evident that his ritual of *mandala* offering aimed to justify Lamaistic hierocracy, the Tibetan system of government defined as the "union of religion and politics" (*chos srid zung 'brel*).[20]

The inclusion of the riches of a universal sovereign in the *maṇḍala* offering, however, was not an innovation of Chögyal Phakpa, as it was already known to the Newari Buddhists of Nepal. The rite, conceived by some Indian masters, is called *guru-maṇḍalārcana*, "offering of the *maṇḍala* to the *guru*. In the Newar tradition, the supreme *guru* to whom the *maṇḍala* is offered is the deity Vajrasattva.[21]

The meaning of the Newar *maṇḍala* offering could be summarized as follows: one who wishes to follow the path of full enlightenment should detach oneself from everything; even if he were a universal sovereign, he should give up his seven riches. Offering the world to *guru* Vajrasattva means being willing to leave everything behind in order to merit the seven riches of a buddha.

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[18] Cf. Tsepon W. D. Shakabpa, *Tibet: A Political History* (New York: Potala Publications, 1984), pp. 61-69; Luciano Petech, *Central Tibetans and the Mongols* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1990), pp. 14-17, 22, 36-37, 51, 139-140; Joseph Askew, *The Status of Tibet in the Diplomacy of China, Britain, the United States and India, 1911-1959*, History/Centre for Asian Studies, June 2002, pp. 12-14.

[19] Masahide Tsujimura, "The Politics of 'Compassion' of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama: Between 'Religion' and 'Secularism,'" *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol. 21, 2014, p. 219.

[20] Cf. D. Seyfort Ruegg, *The Temporal and Spiritual Orders in the Governance of Tibet and the So-Called 'Patron-Priest Relation' in Inner Asia*, pp. 1-2 (yon-mchod 1.7.13 / 15.11.14); Masahide Tsujimura, *op. cit*., pp. 211-213.

[21] Cf. John K. Locke, *Karunamaya: The Cult of Avalokitesvara-Matsyendranath in the valley of Nepal* (Kathmandu: Sahayogi Press, 1980), p. 85; David N. Gellner, "Ritualized devotion, altruism, and meditation: the offering of the *guru maṇḍala* in Newar Buddhism," *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 34, 1991, pp. 163, 177-179; Eric Huntington, *Creating the Universe: Depictions of the Cosmos in Himalayan Buddhism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), pp. 199-122.

Since the appearance of a universal sovereign is a very rare event, a local king or an emperor like Aśoka[22] can accumulate great merits by making ordinary gifts to the community (*saṅgha*) and sponsoring the spread of the Buddha's *dharma*.

In general, the donor,[23] whatever his or her social status, performs the *maṇḍala* offering to develop and nurture the meritorious intent of generous acts for the benefit of the donees,[24] the upright people who practice and teach the *dharma*. Therefore, the reference to the seven riches of a universal ruler would have only exemplary mythological value, yet it has been exploited by donors and donees to justify the mixture of temporal and religious interests.[25]

Unlike the offering formula that includes the seven riches of a universal sovereign, the following verses in Tibetan enunciate only the basic aspects of Buddhist cosmology:[26]

ས་གཞི་སྟོས་ཆུས་བླུགས་ཨིང་མེ་ཏོག་བཀྲམ། །

རི་རབ་གླིང་བཞི་ཉི་ཟླས་བརྒྱན་པ་འདི། །

སངས་རྒྱས་ཞིང་དུ་དམིགས་ཏེ་ཕུལ་བ་ཡིས། །

འཕྲོ་ཀུན་རྣམ་དག་ཞིང་ལ་སྟོད་པར་ཤོག །

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[22] See John S. Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka: A Study and Translation of the Aśokāvadāna* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), p. 243. Cf. Eric Huntington, *op. cit*., pp. 115-116. The exegetical tradition in the Pāli language distinguishes between three types of "sovereign" (*cakkavatti*): a) the sovereign who rules over the whole world (*cakkavāla*); b) the sovereign who rules over a continent (*dīpa*); c) the sovereign who rules over a region (*padesa*). See T.W. Rhys Davids, William Stede (eds.), *Pāli-English Dictionary* (The Pali Text Society, 1921-1925 [1999]), p. 599 (Electronic Edition). The Indian emperor Aśoka was a *dīpa-cakkavatti*. Cf. J. S. Strong, *op. cit*., p. 55.

[23] Tib. *yon bdag*.

[24] Tib. *mchod gnas*.

[25] Cf. D. Seyfort Ruegg, "Mchod yon, yon mchod and mchod gnas/yon gnas: On the historiography and semantics of a Tibetan religio-social and religio-political concept," in E. Steinkellner (ed.), *Tibetan history and language* (Vienna: G. Uray Commemoration Volume, 1991), pp. 441-453.

[26] See *Short Maṇḍala Offering* (Lotsawa House).

The base of the Earth
scented with aromatic water
and sprinkled with flowers
is adorned with Mount Meru,
the four continents,
the Sun and the Moon.
I offer it visualizing it
as the buddha field.
May all beings thus enjoy
this totally pure field.

The illustrated gesture (*mudrā*) ritually accompanies the recitation of the preceding verses or similar ones chanting the *maṇḍala* offering. The ring fingers in the centre symbolize Mount Meru, while the tips of the other fingers juxtaposed refer to the four continents.

In *vajrayāna*, the offering of the *maṇḍala*, in addition to being a way of accumulating merits, is also a ritual means by which one pays homage to masters, requests teachings or initiations and, in the context of meditation, invites the supermundane deities, buddhas and great bodhisattvas, to manifest their *maṇḍala* in the world.

The *maṇḍala* of the buddhas and great bodhisattvas is their pure dimension. They transcend the world but, because they are invited with the offering of the world, a projection of their *maṇḍala* appears on the summit of Mount Meru, from where they can operate in the world.

From the top of Meru the *maṇḍala* of the supermundane deities radiates compassion and wisdom, so that the world purified by the divine rays appears as a buddha field, a place where enlightened beings manifest.

The phenomena of *saṁsāra* are defined as "impure," because of the afflictions produced by the negative karma of ordinary sentient beings; in contrast, the phenomena of *nirvāṇa* manifested by buddhas and great bodhisattvas are "pure."

Although the impure phenomena of *saṁsāra* and the pure phenomena of *nirvāṇa* seem to be opposites, they are actually inseparable. What appears as impure is only an illusory karmic vision, fundamentally unreal; therefore, the world has the same totally pure nature as the *maṇḍala* of the buddhas and great bodhisattvas.

The characteristics of the deities and their heavenly abode are symbols of the true nature of ordinary beings and the world. One who meditates on the original purity of everything, symbolized by the *maṇḍala* of the deities, accumulates wisdom in addition to merits. The highest wisdom is transcendent wisdom.

The passage from the "Diamond Sutra" quoted at the beginning goes on like this: "The venerable [Buddha] said: 'Subhūti, a noble son or a noble daughter completely filled with the seven precious things this universe, a billion worlds, and offered it as a gift. Well, if someone, having memorized even a single stanza of four verses taken from this exposition of *dharma*, were to explain it and teach it correctly and completely also to others, he or she would generate on this basis a much greater, incalculable, immeasurable accumulation of merits.'"[27]

The merits derived from offering the universe filled with the seven precious things are not comparable to the merits generated by studying, practising and sharing the teaching of transcendent wisdom; even if it were only one stanza, the spiritual benefit would be infinitely greater, "because the unsurpassed, perfect and complete enlightenment of the perfect and complete buddha arises from here,

[27] See note 1, "Phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa rdo rje gcod pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo," p. 246.3-4 (BDRC). Cf. E. Conze, *op. cit.*, p. 35; P. Harrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 145.

and the venerable buddhas also spring from here."[28] So goes a passage from the *Dhammapada*:

"The gift of *dharma* surpasses all gifts;
the taste of *dharma* surpasses all tastes;
the pleasure of *dharma* surpasses all pleasures.
The elimination of craving surpasses all sufferings."[29]

In the "Diamond Sutra" there are only three stanzas (*gāthā*). I give below the Sanskrit text,[30] the Tibetan version[31] and my translation followed by a commentary.

ye māṁ rūpeṇa cādrākṣur ye māṁ ghoṣeṇa cānvaguḥ |
mithyāprahāṇaprasṛtā na māṁ drakṣyanti te janāḥ ||

གང་དག་ང་ལ་གཟུགས་སུ་མཐོང་། །གང་དག་ང་ལ་སྒྲར་ཞེས་པ། །
ལོག་པར་སྤོང་བར་ཞུགས་པ་སྟེ། །སྐྱེ་བོ་དེ་དག་ངམི་མཐོང་། །

[1] Those who have seen me through form
and those who followed me through sound,
have engaged in erroneous efforts.
Those people will not see me.[32]

There are those who have believed that they saw the Buddha through the form of his body. Although that form no longer exists, many Buddhist devotees revere his material representations with attachment, as if the Master were present in those images.

There are those who have believed that they followed the Buddha's teaching through the sound of his words. Although that sound has ceased, many Buddhist devotees revere his verbal repres-

[28] "Phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa rdo rje gcod pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo," p. 246.4.5.
[29] *Dhammapada*, 354.
[30] See GRETIL.
[31] See BDRC: [1] pp. 261.7-262.1; [2] p. 262.1; [3] p. 264.5-6.
[32] Cf. E. Conze, *op. cit*., p. 63; P. Harrison, *op. cit*., p. 156.

entations with attachment, as if the Master were present in those books.

To venerate the representations of the Buddha's body and voice requires engaging in continuous efforts, but they are all misguided, being lavished on activities that are not really necessary, because the Master is not truly present in any form and sound.

Therefore, those devout people who have worshipped the Buddha with attachment through his physical and verbal representations will not see the Master, as long as they believe they have to see him as one sees a perceivable object.

dharmato buddho draṣṭavyo dharmakāyā hi nāyakāḥ |
dharmatā ca na vijñeyā na sā śakyā vijānitum ||

སངས་རྒྱས་རྣམས་ནི་ཆོས་ཉིད་བལྟ། །འདྲེན་པ་རྣམས་ནི་ཆོས་ཀྱི་སྐུ། །
ཆོས་ཉིད་ཤེས་པར་བྱ་མིན་པས། །དེ་ནི་རྣམ་པར་ཤེས་མི་ནུས། །

[2] Buddhas should be seen in accordance with *dharma*.
Spiritual guides are actually *dharmakāya*.
The true nature of *dharma* is not to be perceived
and cannot be perceived.

All buddhas should be seen correctly, in accordance with the *dharma* they taught. Since the deepest and final *dharma* is that of wisdom (*prajñā*), the essence of the buddhas is the real meaning of "transcendent wisdom" (*prajñā-pāramitā*).

All spiritual guides who point out the right path of liberation from the illusion of *saṁsāra* are actually not the form of their physical body, but are their spiritual body, the *dharmakāya*, the body that consists in the true deep and ultimate meaning of *dharma*, that is, transcendent wisdom.

Those who wish to understand what is the true nature of the *dharma*, the spiritual essence realized by all buddhas and indicated by the guides, the *dharma* teachers, must understand that it is not a sensory or mental object to be perceived, so it cannot be perceived in a dualistic mode, as if it were a phenomenon.

tārakā timiraṁ dīpo māyāvaśyāya budbudam |
svapnaṁ ca vidyudabhraṁ ca evaṁ draṣṭavya saṁskṛtam ||

སྐར་མ་རབ་རིབ་མཉར་མེ་དང་། །སྒྱུ་མ་ཟིལ་པ་ཆུབྱང་དང་། །
རྨི་ལམ་གློག་དང་སྤྲིན་ལྟ་བུར། །འདུས་བྱས་དེ་ལྟར་བལྟ་བར་བྱ། །

[3] Like a star, an eye ailment, a lamp,
a magic show, a dewdrop, an air bubble,
a dream, a lightning, a cloud;
so one should see what is formed.

Any object of the senses and mind should be seen as a transient, evanescent and illusory phenomenon.

A star cannot be grasped and appears only when darkness falls. An eye ailment, such as the perception of eye floaters, is deceptive. A lamp lasts as long as it is fuelled. A magic show induces unreal perceptions. A dewdrop evaporates in a short time. An air bubble in water quickly vanishes. A dream ends upon awakening. A lightning disappears in an instant. A cloud dissolves ineluctably.

Thus one should see everything that is formed, shaped, produced, created. Thus the world and the entire universe of a billion worlds should be contemplated.

If the buddhas, great bodhisattvas, arhats and spiritual guides are not really the revered forms, it is not necessary to meditate on the *maṇḍala* representing their pure dimensions. From the perspective of transcendent wisdom, there is no circle of divinities to be depicted as a sensory object or visualized as a mental object, nor is there a *mantra* to be recited to invoke divine beings other than oneself.

When one stops looking for buddhas through the sounds of *mantra*s and also stops seeing them through the shapes of the images represented or visualized, one can understand that the spiritual body of all buddhas is one's own spiritual body and that its reality is not an object to be perceived through the senses or the mind.

The spiritual body is the supreme enlightened consciousness (*bodhicitta*), the true nature of consciousness, which must be differentiated from the consciousness subject to the obscurations of karmic afflictions and wrong notions.

The *Sutra of Transcendent Wisdom in 8,000 lines* (*Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*) states: "The true nature of consciousness is luminous."[33] In fact, the Buddha taught that "this consciousness is luminous, but it is obscured by adventitious impurities."[34] So, when temporary and extraneous impurities vanish like clouds, the presence of the spiritual body, the true nature of consciousness, is as evident as the clear, empty sky, devoid of any phenomenal attribute.

If *dharmakāya* is the only real body of the buddhas and is also one's own real spiritual body, what are the *nirmāṇakāya* and *sambhogakāya* named in the *sūtra*s and *tantra*s? Since they are described as expressions of *dharmakāya*, they must be aspects of the true nature of consciousness.

Buddha taught that *dharmakāya* is "the consciousness without attribute, without end, radiant all around: here water, earth, fire and air have no place; here long and short, coarse and subtle, beautiful and ugly, name and form, everything ceases."[35]

The Buddha's enunciation of "the consciousness without attribute, without end, radiant all around" should be understood as the root of the deepest and final explanation of the three *kāya*s.

According to the *atiyoga* (*dzogchen*) tradition, enlightened consciousness has three aspects: empty essence, clear nature and all-pervasive grace.[36]

Empty essence, "without attribute" like the space of the sky, is *dharmakāya*; clear nature, "without end" like the light of the sun, is *sambhogakāya*; and all-pervasive grace, "radiant all around" like the rays of the sun, is *nirmāṇakāya*.

Usually by *nirmāṇakāya*, "emanated body," is meant the physical form of a buddha, but the supreme *nirmāṇakāya* is the immortal life

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[33] GRETIL: *prakṛtiścittasya prabhāsvarā*. Cf. Edward Conze, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

[34] "Pabhassara Sutta," *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 1.49-52. Cf. Piya Tan (tr.), "The Radiant Mind," SD 8.3, pp. 38-40.

[35] Piya Tan (tr.), "Kevaḍḍha Sutta," *Dīgha Nikāya* 11, SD 1.7, p. 174.

[36] rDza dpal sprul o rgyan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po, *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*, Par gzhi dang po, Ser gtsug nang bstan dpe rnying 'tshol bsdu phyogs sgrig khang, 2016 (BDRC), p. 228.20: *ngo bo stong pa/ rang bzhin gsal ba/ thugs rje kun khyab/*. See Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* (Boston: Shambhala, 1998), pp. 177, 413 n. 11.

that animates the physical form. At the moment of death, it withdraws separating from the corpse.

If there is recognition of the spiritual body, the life of one's physical form appears as an emanated body, an expression of the all-pervasive grace of enlightened consciousness.

The term *sambhogakāya* is peculiar to *mahāyāna* Buddhism. *Sambhoga* denotes experience in all its richness of meanings and values. The primary and unceasing experience is cognitive clarity, the clear nature of enlightened consciousness, without which nothing can be experienced. Therefore, *sambhogakāya* is the "experiential body."

If there is recognition of the spiritual body, all personal experiences shine as precious ornaments of the experiential body, natural cognitive clarity.

Since the three buddha bodies are already present in all beings, at least as potentialities to be recognized, each body has its own specific *maṇḍala*, a natural environment.

The world characterized by phenomenal appearances is the outer *maṇḍala* of the emanating body. The organism, that is, the physical body moving in the world, is the inner *maṇḍala* of the experiential body. The mind that dwells in the organism and perceives phenomena is the secret *maṇḍala* of the spiritual body.

The final aim of meditation on the three *maṇḍala* offered to the three buddha bodies is one's proper spiritual orientation with respect to the outer environment of the phenomenal world, the inner environment of the physical body and the secret environment of the mind.

The ultimate meaning of the *maṇḍala* offering is expressed in some sources of the ancient Tibetan tradition (*nyingma*),[37] esoteric teachings connected with the *dzogchen* (*atiyoga*) tradition. Although these explanations are not easily accessible and understandable, their symbolic representation is commonly used by Buddhists of Tibetan culture.

[37] See Yukhok Chatralwa Chöying Rangdrol, *Maṇḍala Offering* (Lotsawa House). This text is a brief explanation of the *maṇḍala* offering as a "preliminary practice" (*ngondro*) according to different traditions.

The pictures at the beginning and end of this paper depict an object used in the *maṇḍala* offering ritual formulated by Chögyal Phakpa. At one time, however, such a metal structure symbolized only the three *maṇḍala*s and their relationship to the three buddha bodies.

The base has the shape of a round bottom vessel turned upside down. The first ring portrays the upper section of the insurmountable barrier that encloses the world and marks the boundary of the first *maṇḍala*. The other two rings are concentric, representing the inner *maṇḍala* and the secret *maṇḍala*.

Rice symbolizes all precious contents. Following the filling of the first ring, the second ring is placed on it to denote the manifestation of the corresponding *maṇḍala*. Then this ring is also filled, so that it becomes the basis of the third. After the last ring is filled, the pinnacle is placed on top.

The filling stages indicate the process of manifestation of the three *maṇḍala*s. The outer *maṇḍala* is the base of the inner *maṇḍala*'s manifestation, on whose base the secret *maṇḍala* is manifested.

The three *maṇḍala* are offered to the three buddha bodies represented by the pinnacle: its top depicts the "wheel of dharma," the symbol of *dharmakāya*; the flames surrounding it correspond to *sambhogakāya*, while the underlying "vase of immortal life" denotes *nirmāṇakaya*.

From the perspective of *atiyoga*, there is no *maṇḍala* to be offered and there is also no one outside of oneself to whom it is to be offered, so no intentional action of offering is required. What is called "offering" is actually the homage paid to the three buddha bodies, by acknowledging their presence in the respective natural *maṇḍala*s.

The wheel of *dharma*.

Third ring:
the secret *maṇḍala*

Second ring:
the inner *maṇḍala*.

First ring:
the outer *maṇḍala*.

The base of the *maṇḍala*.

Courtesy of [Himalayan Art Resources]